“The Best Education in the World”: reality, repetition or cliché? International students’ reasons for choosing an English university

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Abstract

Universities and students collaborate in a shared language of excellence, quality and choice and become part of the same “neo-liberal discourse of marketisation and commodification, and globalisation” (Sauntson and Morrish 2010 p.83) where each plays their part as provider and consumer in a highly competitive international area. Whilst there are an increasing number of studies focused on the use of the Internet and website use, there are still only very few papers on the use of websites in the context of Higher Education and university choice.

This study uses a sample of 60 personal statements from online post-graduate applications submitted by overseas students. The extracts are coded for analysis and compared against the website information provided on university and British Council websites during the time period of the applications. Applicants used nouns, adjectives and phrases published on the British Council website and the website of their target university. (148 words).

Keywords: choice; marketisation; quality; reputation
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Introduction to the HE market in the UK

The trends in global student mobility and the simultaneous expansion of the use of the Internet have contributed to a rapidly evolving market in international education, which in turn has created new opportunities and challenges (Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003). The increasingly competitive environment of the education sector, diminishing university funds and the introduction of new government backed marketing campaigns to increase the number of international students at British universities, further highlights the growing importance of marketing, advertising and promotion of educational institutions (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006).

The literature on higher education expansion indicates that the higher education market is now well-established as a global phenomenon, especially in the major English-speaking nations: Canada, the US, Australia and the UK (Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003) and there is evidence of marketisation and the deregulation of universities in the US (Allen and Shen 1999; Dill 2003) Canada (Kwong 2000; Young 2002) the UK (Adams and Bumgardner 1991; Middleton 1996; Williams 1997; Gibbs 2001; Taylor 2003); Australia (Baldwin and James 2000) and New Zealand (Ford, Joseph, and Joseph 1999). However, governments have also turned to deregulatory policies in Japan (Arimoto 1997), Russia (Hare and Lugachev 1999), the Eastern Bloc (Czarniawska and Genell 2002), Holland (Jongbloed 2003), Spain (Mora 1997), Israel
(Oplatka 2002) China (Adams and Bumgardner 1991; Williams, Liu, and Shi 1997; Mok 1999; Mok 2000), Asia (Gray, Fam, and Llanes 2003), and Africa (Ivy 2001; Maringe and Foskett 2002; Maringe 2004).

Throughout these rapid developments, the British Council has worked intensively and collaboratively with most British universities to promote higher education in Britain and British education as a whole. This form of collaborative partnership is now more common throughout the world, where countries are seeking to attract increasing numbers of overseas students to study in their countries. For example, although the British Council has been established for about 75 years (British Council 2005), Australia, Canada and New Zealand, have created non-profit organizations within the last fifteen years to promote the internationalization of HE in their countries: the Australian Education International (AEI); Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), and Education New Zealand (ENZ) respectively. This partnership is a form of co-branding and shows cooperation between two distinct brands – individual universities in each country and the non-profit organisation, to leverage the assets of both (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007).

This paper is based on the findings from a two-stage qualitative research study of postgraduate applications to one case study business school in a 1994 Group University in England. A probability sample of sixty (60) online applications for postgraduate programmes in management was identified for the study: 30 applications submitted between 2005 and 2006; and a further sweep of 30 applications submitted between 2008 and 2009.
Background and context to international student choice

The Association of International Educators\(^1\) in the US (NAFSA 2010) calculates that the economic impact of international students and their dependants on the US economy. During the 2008-2009 academic year NAFSA estimates that international students and their dependants contributed approximately $17.6 billion to the US economy. In the UK income from international students also makes a considerable contribution to GDP. UK higher education institutions (HEIs) are worth £45 billion annually to the UK economy and are a major export earner. The annual contribution to the UK’s national income made by international students is estimated at £5.5 billion (International Unit 2010). To some extent this is the result of the UK government-backed £5 million three-year worldwide campaign in 2000 to attract more international students to the UK (BBC News 2000). The intention was to ‘brand’ higher education in the UK and ‘sell’ it through the British Council offices throughout the world. This marketing campaign was viewed as a critical step in achieving the targets set to increase the numbers of overseas students attending UK universities. When the targets were first set in 1999 by the UK government, it was announced that the drive for more international students would be achieved and led by a brand re-positioning exercise for UK universities. The aims of the marketing campaign were to establish a clear and competitive identity for UK education through creating awareness of what the UK distinctively has to offer, reinforcing positive

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\(^1\) Previously known as the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA)
perceptions and countering misconceptions (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007). The British Council website, alongside the websites of individual universities and faculties, has played a significant role in building and developing a distinctive identity for HE in the UK.

In the light of these rapid changes worldwide, there is considerable research that attempts to explore international student choice in HE markets (Shanka, Quintal, and Taylor 2005; Gatfield and Chen 2006; Liang-Hsuan 2008; Salisbury et al. 2009) (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, and Pascarella 2009) and higher education marketing (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). On the demand-side, a number of papers also focus on the choice factors of the student-consumer (Baldwin and James 2000; Umashankar 2001; Pugsley and Coffey 2002; Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003; Simões and Soares 2010); and research seeking to identify key factors in the choice of higher education has been conducted by researchers based in Australia (e.g. Kemp and Madden 1998; Soutar and Turner 2002) and the UK (e.g. Ball et al. 2002), with some research on students’ choice in international markets (Kemp and Madden 1998; Gomes and Murphy 2003; Pimpa 2003; Shanka, Quintal, and Taylor 2005; Gatfield and Chen 2006; Cubillo, Sanchez, and Cervino 2006; Pyvis and Chapman 2007; Maringe and Carter 2007; Liang-Hsuan 2008; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, and Pascarella 2009).

Searches also reveal that there is little or no research exploring the influence of the British Council or other agencies on these decisions (with the possible exception of (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007) and limited research on the use of website
for university choice (Klassen 2002; Ooi, Ho, and Amri 2010). Research thus far has concentrated almost exclusively on the direct relationship between the student-chooser and the university with considerable focus on demographics and lifestyle: e.g. gender (Davies and Guppy 1997; Hung, Chung, and Ho 2000; Dawes and Brown 2002; Judson, James, and Aurand 2004; Gormley and Murphy 2006; Briggs 2006; Mastekaasa and Smeby 2008; Cho et al. 2008; González-Arnal and Kilkey 2009; Yingui 2009; Boudarbat and Montmarquette 2009); sexuality (Taulke-Johnson 2010); financial constraints (Young 2002; Briggs and Wilson 2007; González-Arnal and Kilkey 2009) social class differences (Menon 2004; Siegfried and Getz 2006; Özdemir and Hacifazlıoğlu 2008; Yingui 2009) and ethnicity (Perna and Pern 2000; Reay et al. 2001; Leslie 2003; Judson, James, and Aurand 2004; Dawes and Brown 2004; Ishitani 2006; Yingui 2009).

The key factors which emerged from previous research on student choice of higher education also include suitability, academic reputation, job prospects and teaching quality (Soutar and Turner 2002), geographical or travel considerations (Kemp and Madden 1998; Moogan, Baron, and Harris 1999; Moogan, Baron, and Bainbridge 2001). family influences (Pugsley and Coffey 2002; Pimpa 2003) and advertising media (Jugenheimer 1995; Gatfield and Chen 2006; Simões and Soares 2010). Much of the research is also quantitative surveys (Davies and Guppy 1997; Price et al. 2003; McClaran 2003; Imenda, Kongolo, and Grewal 2004; Menon 2004; Briggs and Wilson 2007; Lang 2009; Park 2009; Boudarbat and Montmarquette 2009) rather than
qualitative research (Cresswell 1998; Reay, Davies, David, and Ball 2001; Booth 2001; Reay, Ball., and David 2002).

The predominantly qualitative study reported in this paper, which aimed to identify the reasons students provided for choosing a specific university in their personal statements, relies on an unusual data collection a source and focuses on students’ own reasons for their choices. Using personal statements as a source of secondary data for research is rare but not unique – (Ding 2007) conducted a multi-level discourse analysis on 30 medical and dentistry personal statements to discover reasons students gave for pursuing medical dentistry studies.

**International Marketing of Higher Education**

The subject of international students’ choice of university has been a key topic for both empirical research (Mazzarol 1998; Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003; Gomes and Murphy 2003; Gray, Fam, and Llanes 2003; Maringe and Carter 2007; Liang-Hsuan 2008) and theoretical papers (Nicholls et al. 1995; Mazzarol and Hosie 1996; Mazzarol 1998; Mazzarol and Soutar 1999; Baldwin and James 2000; Czarniawska and Genell 2002; Jongbloed 2003). Much of the interest in research on university choice has been stimulated by increasing competition for overseas students, for example; theoretical papers have focused on: gaining competitive advantage (Mazzarol and Soutar 1999; Czarniawska and Genell 2002) as well as institutional and sector image (Amiso 2000; Oplatka 2002).

The author also finds support for the argument that the image portrayed by a university plays a crucial role in public attitudes towards that institution, and towards
a whole (Landrum, Turrisi, and Harless 1998). A study by
Paramewaran and Glowacka (1995) into university image argues that higher
education institutions need to maintain or develop a distinct image to create a
competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive international market. It is, after
all, this image that will impact on a student’s willingness to apply to that institution;
therefore it becomes essential to establish an image in the eyes of stakeholders (Ivy
2001). The basis of developing a brand in educational institutions is to enable that
institution to be attractive to students and to differentiate British education and
training from its major competitors, in particular the USA and Australia (and
emerging markets such as those in mainland Europe) and to demonstrate higher
education’s true capability in being a real contender to other countries (BBC News
2000).

Whilst there are an increasing number of studies focused on the use of the Internet and
website use, there are still only very few papers on the use of websites in the context
of Higher Education and university choice. (Klassen 2002) argues that ‘universities
and colleges in the US have increasingly developed websites to provide marketing
information to students, alumni and shareholders’ (p.81). The claim that today’s
websites provide students with the ability to apply for a course programme online,
experience a virtual tour of the campus and read course details and assignment
eamples. (Klassen 2002) found three categories of studies relating to the use of the
Internet for the marketing of higher education: those identifying what students want
from websites; practical applications for how websites could be used for recruitment and those papers which assess existing university websites for content and scope.

Gomes & Murphy’s (2003) study of potential HE students’ use of the Internet to facilitate information searching and decision-making, explores ‘how educational institutions use Internet technologies (websites and email) to market to prospective students, as well as how prospective students use these same technologies in their decision-making processes’ (Gomes and Murphy 2003 p.116). These authors conclude that many variables influence a student’s decision to study overseas and the most critical variable is information (Gomes and Murphy 2003 p.119). They found that in choosing overseas education prospective students find it hard to investigate and verify the claims made by universities. Gomes and Murphy also point out that educational courses are complex and long-term and reliable information from a reputable and independent source is one of the keys to students’ choices. For these reasons it is clear that prospective students applying from overseas will seek information from a number of sources online in addition to the universities’ websites. Finally, a paper by (Ooi, Ho, and Amri 2010) focused on education websites and the benefits to potential international students, with the main argument focusing on the importance of developing an Internet presence for all educational institutions. The study concluded that the source and accuracy of the content was related to trust and the prestige of the educational institution and they found that the navigability and accessibility of the website was critical in terms of encouraging and retaining web
traffic. The study, however, was based on only three websites in Malaysia and therefore has limited generalisability.

This paper is based on analysis of the qualitative data using personal statements as a source, from a two-stage study of corporate and faculty-level marketing of one 1994 Group university in the UK, which attracted over 4,000 postgraduate applications to the business school in 2005-2006 and 2008-2009. The university has agents and overseas centres offering undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programmes in many locations (for example, Asia, Europe and the West Indies) throughout the world. A key objective of this study is to examine some of the key reasons students themselves give for applying to the management school and the university – factors that relate to the university and the school specifically which prompted their application.

**Methodology**

This study relies on a case study of a business school in one HE institution using secondary data stored on the admissions system. The data were accessed via the case study university’s admissions system database – over 90% of applicants apply on-line, and the remaining data from hard copy applications are entered onto the database by administrators (excluding the personal statements). Access was granted to these data after gaining ethical permission from the institution. A total of 6,195 online applications were subsequently recorded on the electronic admissions system between the dates, November 1\textsuperscript{st} 2005 – October 31\textsuperscript{st} 2006, from applicants who were seeking registration for the academic year 2006-2007. After applying the sampling frame, (to
exclude those no longer accessible through data protection, those who were still being processed and those who had not yet been entered on the database from paper applications) the population from which the sample was drawn was 4,800, in other words those accessible on the system at the time of data collection on August 1st 2006. The random sample was generated by utilising SPSS using only the ID numbers of applicants who applied between November 1st 2005 and July 31st 2006. Sixty ID numbers were selected using SPSS (to allow for some which might not be available on the system).

A second stage of data collection was carried out using the 2008-2009 applications database on August 15th 2010. There were 4,510 applications on the system for this time period. After applying the sampling frame however, 712 applicants were eligible for selection and these are students who are currently registered on postgraduate programmes for the year 2009-2010. Random sampling could only be carried out using currently registered students (712) (due to the searchable categories) therefore a cluster sampling process was used. The students enrolled on two programmes (International Business Management and Marketing Management) were selected randomly, from which the sample was drawn. All students in these cohorts are eligible for inclusion in the study (150 students). University identity numbers of students from these two modules were used to search the database for original applications and personal statements until 30 personal statements had been identified for the study. The researcher inserted the personal statements into a Word document for analysis.
Quantitative data for both samples comprises categorical data indicating gender; nationality and for the 2005-2006 sample only, the key source of marketing information which prompted the application (generated from one multiple choice question with 70 options in a drop-down list). Qualitative data from personal statements are analysed and coded by the author-researcher. The data are categorised and quotes specifically relating to choosing the university and the school are extracted from the personal statements – only those extracts which refer directly or indirectly to the university and the school, are used; all other information has been discarded.

The reason for employing a qualitative inductive approach to the research is to explore a substantive area about which little is known and where there is a lack of established theory for testing within the higher education sector: exploratory research is therefore deemed the most appropriate. In addition, qualitative research enables intricate details to be obtained about thought processes, feelings and motives which are difficult to extract through the use of quantitative survey research methods (Cresswell 1998; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The use of survey methods tends to introduce respondents to a wide range of factors and items, which have already been identified as possible influences on choice, which prompts respondents to give their opinion. This process masks the individual reasons for choice that students more formally give for their application to a UK university. This research relies on the applicants providing their own unprompted reasons for choosing the institution. The concentration of efforts on one case rather than many allows insights to be gained
from looking at the individual case, generating wider implications that may not be brought to light if a larger number of cases are utilised.

**Profile of the sample**

The data identified by the researcher for analysis comprises 60 student personal statements, 30 for each year group (2005-2006 & 2008-2009); in 2005-2006 there are 19 males and 11 females and in 2008-2009 there are 18 males and 12 females. In both samples the largest single nationality group is Chinese, with between 1 and 4 students from a range of other countries around the world. Tables 1 and 2 show the nationalities of the samples.

Table 1 – Sample of Applicants by nationality for 2005-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cypriot</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libyan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepalese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Sample of Applicants by nationality for 2008-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukranian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After deleting the content of the personal statements that relates to other topics (principally topics such as why the applicant wants to become a manager, how they view their career path after studying for a masters degree; and information on the applicant’s background and experience) there were 18 extracts from 2005-2006 and 19 extracts for 2008-2009. The researcher acknowledges some limitations of this approach due to the small sample size relative to the population of applicants and the possibility that students from some countries may be more likely to write a personal statement than others is acknowledged.

Findings

Students who applied during 2005-2006 completed one multiple choice question indicating what prompted their application. This question is no longer on the system
and so the data are not available for the second sample. The results are shown in Table 3, and show the unexpected finding that, apart from word of mouth (the most likely answer to this type of question), the British Council was the prompt for five applicants deciding to apply to the university. The sample, however, is very small given the size of the population from which they were selected – but the sample is a scientifically random sample. Even as early as 2005-2006 it also shows that a weblink was also providing a good prompt for students to make an application. (Although all the applications are on the electronic system, some applicants could have applied in writing on an application form and the details would have been entered onto the system by an administrator).

Table 3 - Main reason for deciding to apply to the university

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What prompted your application?</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Council</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOM</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website link</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper magazine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Assoc</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of personal statement extracts followed the stages described by Marshall and Rossman (1995) which are: organising data, generating categories, themes and
patterns, testing any emergent hypotheses and searching for alternative explanations. The analysis aims to identify the central themes emerging from the data and to this end data is coded and collated using a grid to enable recurrent themes to be identified (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2005). As a result of this process the extracts are categorised based on whether they related to the school, the university as a whole or studying in the UK (which was most often linked with reference to the school and university). The style of the wording and phrasing used by the students in the first sweep prompted a search of the school, university and British Council websites for comparison. Because of the exploratory nature of the study and the unusually formal wording the applicants were using the researcher was prompted to find some possible sources for these extracts. These data are presented under category headings, by cohorts with the related website sources for comparison: reputation and excellence, location and environment, and teaching learning and employment. The themes emerged from the data analysis process for this research. However, in their chapter on vision, values and international excellence (Sauntson and Morrish 2010) assembled a corpus of university mission statements and identified three sub-corpora representing the three earliest mission groups: Russell Group universities comprising the twenty major research intensive universities in the UK; 1994 Group universities comprising nineteen smaller, internationally renowned research intensive institutions; and Million+ universities which are mainly those that gained university status after 1992. The analysis provided by (Sauntson and Morrish 2010) resulted in noun frequency lists. For 1994 group universities the words: academic*, teaching*,
quality*, knowledge*, learning*, excellence*, environment*, work, development, industry and community were some of those listed. There is also an overlap with Russell group noun lists in this respect and these words are asterisked in the previous listing. Excellence and quality are common nouns in all three lists, but “work” and “industry” are only found in the 1994 group list. One might reasonably expect therefore, that the words emerging from this research would be biased towards those on the 1994 group list provided by (Sauntson and Morrish 2010).

**Reputation and Excellence**

Students in this study who mentioned the school or the university in their personal statements in 2005-2006 frequently used words and phrases such as ‘reputation’ and ‘excellence’ to explain why they were submitting an application to the school. Extracts taken from the school and the university website mention the ‘global reputation’ of the school and the ‘excellence in teaching quality’ and the main university website also makes claims for ‘excellent teaching quality’ and ‘reputation for excellence’. These statements are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Reputation and Excellence 2005-2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants 2005-2006</th>
<th>Website (source of the phrase)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…a global reputation for both teaching and research in this sector. In addition, the remarkable quality of the course attracted me to the UK</td>
<td>has a global reputation for both teaching and research (Head of School)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…enjoys a high reputation of proven</td>
<td>excellent teaching quality (school)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
excellent (sic) teaching quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>... is one of the top management schools in the world</th>
<th>One of the top management schools (school)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ...being overwhelmed by the illustriousness and reputation of the university of (…) business school, I believe the university of (…) will offer excellent teaching resources and facilities to students | excellent teaching resources and facilities (university)
| offers excellence in a broad range of subject areas (university) |
| ...The reputation of the university is among the finest for sustaining academic excellence and improving foundational skills, this has made me very enthusiastic to join this programme | international university with a worldwide reputation for excellence in teaching and research (university) |

These words and phrases also appear in applicants’ personal statements for 2008-2009 (see Table 5), where the emphasis continues to be on reputation, excellence and quality – phrases that also appear on the website for the school and the university during the same period and these also feature on the revised British Council website.

Although there are variations in the descriptions on these websites, the wording still focuses on reputation, quality and excellence but with new vocabulary introduced by the British Council in relation to a British education: highly regarded, recognised and respected. The applicants’ statements reflect the statements in the advertising on the relevant websites, sometimes using the same wording ‘excellent teaching quality’ (2005-2006) and reflect the same overall meaning – an excellent reputation and either a global or a worldwide reputation. One additional concept appears in the 2008-2009 statements and also on the newer British Council website: ‘innovation’, in relation to research (applicant’s statement) and ‘world leader in innovation’ and ‘innovative approach’ (British Council 2010). Innovation was not mentioned on the 2005-2006 websites and was not mentioned by 2005-2006 applicants.
Table 5: Reputation and Excellence 2008-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants 2008-2009</th>
<th>Website (source page)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>… is listed as one of the top business schools in UK</td>
<td>…world-class management education to an international community, providing internationally recognized undergraduate and postgraduate degrees across a broad range of business and management disciplines. (school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...it is one of the most distinguished universities in United Kingdom. Namely, it was ranked at 30th, in Good University Guide 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… with the world-class faculties</td>
<td>an international university with a worldwide reputation for excellence in teaching and research (university) highly regarded international and vibrant university (university)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excellent reputation that your university has for quality education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...I believe that the Master’s programme offered by your prestigious university…</td>
<td>...tradition of excellence and an innovative approach to teaching makes UK education recognized and respected all over the world. (British Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognised as a centre of excellence to the partnerships with international companies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... and its reputation for the support of the innovation in research.</td>
<td>...tradition of excellence and an innovative approach The UK is a world-leader in innovation (British Council)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Location and Environment

Applicants also give reasons for choosing the school and the university based on issues to do with the location of their studies (UK) and the environment which they view as conducive to study (Table 6). From the 2005-2006 sample these statements included phrases reflecting advertising claims that appeared on the British Council website at that time. One dominant theme that emerged from statements written by the first sample is from the British Council website which boasted that ‘UK institutions are among the best in the world’. This claim is reflected in statements by applicants who argue that ‘Britain provides the best education in the world’ or the
‘best place to study’ (British Council 2005). The study environment is also mentioned in advertising and in personal statements, and the school’s advertising has been directly copied in one personal statement which refers to a ‘multi-national and multi-cultural environment’.

Table 6: Location and Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants 2005-2006</th>
<th>Website (source pages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...For these many reasons, I feel that Great Britain is the best place for me to study</td>
<td>‘Quality standards for UK institutions are among the best in the world’ (British Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am attracted to your wide range of course offerings, (...) and you could provide me with a better environment for further study</td>
<td>challenging environment in which to develop your potential (British Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the UK as my destination because Britain provides the best education in the world</td>
<td>‘Quality standards for UK institutions are among the best in the world’ (British Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities in Britain offer the best education and graduates from it have exciting prospects</td>
<td>‘Quality standards for UK institutions are among the best in the world’ (British Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... that enables students to develop their competencies for working in multi-national and multi-cultural environments</td>
<td>... multi-national and multi-cultural environment (school)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The advertising claims made by both the British Council and the school are different in 2008-2009 (Table 7) perhaps because both websites have been updated. However, there is one statement made by an applicant in this cohort that refers to the study environment in the UK. In this statement, the applicant uses the specific term ‘cosmopolitan’ – which also appears on the new British Council website (British Council 2010).

Table 7: Location and Environment 2008-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants 2008-2009</th>
<th>Website (source)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20
is located in England, one of the most cosmopolitan counties in the world

As the UK is such a cosmopolitan society you’ll find that many UK customs are already familiar to you – so you’ll settle in faster than you think. (British Council)

**Teaching, Learning and Employment**

Applicants also refer to issues to do with teaching, learning and employment in their personal statements. The statements about employment are in evidence for both cohorts (Table 8 and Table 9) and the university website highlights employment success for graduates of the university. One 2005-2006 applicant claims that improving employment prospects is one reason for applying to the school, however, it is the university’s website that mentions ‘employment prospects’ and boasts about the employment of graduates. The school’s website does not mention employment in 2005-2006 or 2008-2009. There are references to skills, and competencies by one applicant, but there was nothing on the websites referring to this, although the British Council does mention the benefits of a variety of teaching and assessment methods (British Council 2010) this is not referred to by any of the sample applicants.

**Table 8: Teaching, Learning & Employment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants 2005-2006</th>
<th>Website (source)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…I am keen to build upon and develop further a wide range of skills and competencies..</td>
<td>‘[UK] institutions use a variety of teaching and assessment methods to encourage independence, as well as mastery of the subject’ (British Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose to apply for the (...) MSc in (...) management programme to improve my employment prospects.</td>
<td>… employment prospects.. (university) our graduates enjoying full time employment (university)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
 Applicants’ statements for the 2008-2009 cohort raise a further issue of interest, the statement ‘outstanding faculty and research facilities, emphasis on a collaborative learning environment, flexibility in curriculum’ has all the appearance of a statement taken from advertising but is not taken from the school, university or British Council websites. A Google search using this specific phrase reveals that this is taken directly from a website giving advice on writing a personal statement. So it has been copied (plagiarised), but from a different source, that is, (Statementofpurpose.com 2010). Further personal statement content does not match well with the school or university website – although the topics are similar, the wording is not identical. Knowledge and skills are mentioned by one applicant but are not directly related to the school’s reference to these issues and although enterprise and links are mentioned these are not taken from the university’s advertising directly, although industry links and employment are referred to.

Table 9: Teaching, Learning & Employment 2008-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants 2008-2009</th>
<th>Website (source)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>… will equip me with the <strong>knowledge and skills</strong> essential for my future success.</td>
<td>…aims to develop business leaders with <strong>vision, knowledge, creativity, skills, ethics and entrepreneurial ability</strong> (school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… outstanding faculty and research facilities, emphasis on a <strong>collaborative learning environment, flexibility in curriculum</strong></td>
<td>… outstanding faculty and research facilities, emphasis on a collaborative learning environment, flexibility in curriculum … (Statementofpurpose.com 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s also well known that (...) university has the <strong>best employment record</strong> of almost any other UK university Meanwhile, the employment rate of graduates lists top three in the UK</td>
<td>high academic standards, employment success and a prime location in beautiful surroundings (university)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| ...because the strong international enterprise link | strong industry links and outstanding employment opportunities (university) |

**Overlapping themes**

Further analysis by the researcher reveals that there are personal statements from the second sample which refer to advertising statements made on the earlier websites. For example, references to teaching and teaching resources were a feature of the more descriptive 2005-2006 website and this is deemed attractive for one of the 2008-2009 applicants (Table 10). However, teaching resources and facilities are not mentioned on the 2008-2009 websites.

Table 10: 2008-09 themes taken from previous websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants 2008-2009</th>
<th>Old website links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...provides outstanding teaching resources and attaches importance to working skills, it's extremely attractive to me.</td>
<td>excellent teaching resources and facilities <em>(university old website)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...highly aware of the superiority of the British educational system,</td>
<td>‘Quality standards for UK institutions are among the best in the world’ <em>(British Council old website)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...one of the top universities in the United Kingdom,</td>
<td>One of the top management schools <em>(school old website)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, one applicant from 2008-2009 also mentions that the university is one of the top universities in the United Kingdom which is not directly referred to on the websites in 2008-2009 although it is implied (for example there are pages showing the league table positions for subject disciplines). The 2005-2006 school website claims
that the school is one of the top management schools, but this topic does not feature on the recent website. The ‘best in the world’ claim on the British Council website is also implied in the 2008-2009 statement about the superiority of the British education system, even though this no longer features on the British Council website of this period. This exhausts the personal statements made by applicants in these two cohorts. The researcher has not excluded substantial statements from the study (although many sentences are truncated to facilitate presentation).

Discussion of findings

The key factors which emerged from previous research on student choice of higher education have focused on suitability, academic reputation, job prospects and teaching quality in addition to demographics, social constraints, and financial factors. Previous research also tends to use quantitative research methods to measure the importance of a pre-determined list of choice factors, and this approach has resulted in a focus on factors associated with the student profile as well as features associated with the institutions. The research reported in this paper uses an open-ended approach and existing data from personal statements where applicants decide for themselves which factors are important to them when choosing to make an application for a post graduate degree programme in management. Analysis of the specific personal statement content that focused on the choice of the school and the university reveal that there is more alignment between the content of the applicants’ statements and the website information provided on the school, university and the British Council websites, than could be expected simply by chance.
Firstly, the author argues that the students are providing some insights into what they see as the reality of making an international postgraduate application – their perception of the choice factors is revealed in what they have chosen to comment upon. The process of decision-making places students in both a strong and a weak situation – they feel the empowerment of making a free choice of country of study, university and programme but they also feel their weakness as someone who is seeking to be selected through a competitive process. Many applicants are also overseas and they do not have the opportunity to visit campuses and speak to the faculty to verify the claims or to enable them to reach decisions for themselves about the strengths of different institutions.

Secondly, personal statements provide an opportunity to give reasons but they tend to be the reasons the applicant might think the admissions tutors want to hear. Many applicants have somewhat limited English skills and seek to find ways of writing perfect English by copying and repeating some phrases to supplement their own words. In defence of the applicants, they may wish to please admissions tutors and seek to demonstrate that their skills, knowledge and aspirations meet those of the institution they are applying to. Nonetheless, the reasons applicants provide in these circumstances tend to be realistic given the competition for places, therefore applicants focus on what they believe admissions tutors would think are important reasons for choosing an institution. They provide an appearance of rationality in a situation where perhaps the applicant has made the choice for other less rational reasons. Students try to be realistic in terms of the choices they make and try to
match their qualifications, experience and ambitions to the characteristics and strengths of the university and the school. Applicants are faced, however, with a discourse that largely fails to distinguish between institutions but the familiarity of the nouns used to describe universities in their advertising and promotion is easily adopted and repeated by students seeking to be selected by those same institutions. Although authors have argued that the choice process is not rational or is less than rational (Menon, Saiti, and Socratous 2007), applicants provide reasons for others which give a public face to their choice, because decision-making is both subjective and objective (Hemsley-Brown 1999).

Thirdly, students in this study, from both cohorts, state that they are applying to a university because of reasons set out in the claims the advertisers make for that university (and for a British education) and by most universities in the mission group. So, therefore it appears that the advertising slogans and strap lines become the reasons some applicants provide to support a choice. Universities attempt to provide realistic information but at the same time, they boast about their strengths. (Sauntson and Morrish 2010 p.81) note that the “teams of managers who write these documents are charged with propounding a particular institutional narrative recounted through the lexicon of business and industry”. However, the self promotion and branding for most universities relies on some rather “abstract claims and this takes place through the use of the same few nouns and adjectives which vary for each mission group” (Sauntson and Morrish 2010 p.81). Similarly the British Council presents the most positive aspects of studying in Britain and relies on a very similar lexicon. (Sauntson

and Morrish 2010) argue that because nouns such as excellent and quality are used so frequently by so many institutions the terms become meaningless, and semantically vague. This study focused on applications to one 1994 University, and the vocabulary used by students is in line with the vocabulary used to describe a university that belongs to the 1994 mission group.

Fourthly, a more practical perspective is also that universities begin to use the reasons offered by students to provide ideas for their advertising content. Therefore, this can be a two-way process – students respond to the advertising on the websites and give these factors as reasons for choice; institutions monitor the reasons students give for choosing that university and then use these reasons to reinforce and focus their advertising. There is a process of reciprocity in the dialogue that is often not fully acknowledged. Universities and students collaborate in a shared language of excellence, quality and choice and become part of the same “neo-liberal discourse of marketisation and commodification and globalisation” (Sauntson and Morrish 2010 p.83) where each plays their part as provider and consumer in a highly competitive international area.

The claims made on the British Council website influence applicants’ thinking about choosing to study in the UK – they argue that a British education is the best, or the best in the world. This goes further than just a generic British education – the claim made for a British Education is assumed to apply to the specific university, and to the school. But in reality this is how the best education must work – being delivered in individual universities and faculties. How much of a reality this is depends perhaps
on the universities that the applicants choose and this shapes their expectations and influences their choices. The differences between a British education, a British university and a faculty or school are obscured in the convention of the mission statements, and the use of a limited range of nouns and adjectives seem to be multi-functional and polysemic.

Applicants seem to apply the language of quality and excellence across all levels and claims made by the school are assumed to apply to the university, in the same way that claims made by the British Council are assumed to relate to British universities and faculties. In terms of the differences between the websites (British Council, university and school) and the statements from 2005-2006 and 2008-2009 there does seem to be a slight shift but a shift that perhaps shows movement towards the reality of universities rather than just the more clichéd advertising copy. Websites now have more links, more pages and more information about courses but with less general text or copy about the university and the school. The British Council also says less about a British education more generally and focuses on British life rather than just education. The university seems makes less use of the nouns and adjectives of quality, reputation and excellence which have an “indeterminate semantic range” (Sauntson and Morrish 2010 p.83) and now mentions learning, teaching and innovation the latter being tagged as more Russell Group than 1994 group.

Finally, the repetition of some commonly used nouns, adjectives and phrases by applicants in terms of universities and higher education, could be based to some extent on obsequious behaviour, telling admissions tutors what they want to hear, that
is, parodying the advertisers’ copy and using the language of the managers. This demonstrates that applicants have done their research in terms of applying to the UK for higher education, and that they have also read the websites related to the university, the school and the programme they are interested in. For example, ‘centre of excellence’ is a statement that managers and advertisers utilise, but one of the sample applicants uses this phrase in his/her statement. Another applicant simply takes a phrase from a website on how to write a personal statement, and has applied this to the university they are applying to, even though it is not necessarily relevant to that university. In this context the statement reads like an obsequious parody of what managers, educators and advertisers write. The phrases taken from the personal statement website are longer and more recognisable as a source than any of the other extracts. This particular copying is technically plagiarism, which academics would certainly have reason to be concerned about.

In conclusion, there is no evidence from a study of this nature to enable the researcher to make statements or claims about whether these personal statements are written by applicants in order to demonstrate that they engage with the university and its image and reputation; or whether applicants are merely participating in the shared discourse of marketisation and commodification. By 2008-2009 there does appear to be a more modest use of language, fewer ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ claims are made, and more ‘teaching and learning’, ‘skills’ and ‘innovation’ language is used. Innovation is an additional word emerging for 2008-2009 that was not part of 2005-2006 advertising. One might speculate that the claims of ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ are becoming
“semantically vague” (Sauntson and Morrish 2010) and meaningless or even recognised as clichéd. The phrase ‘best education in the world’ is less frequent in personal statements more recently and as an advertising catchphrase by 2008-2009 but is replaced by ‘cosmopolitan society’, which is stated clearly on the British Council website (British Council 2010). Perhaps “the best education in the world” is a cliché or is it just that it is no longer a reality given the World Rankings?

**Limitations of the study**

The study has a number of limitations. First, the sample is small but this is often the case with qualitative research, however the study uses probability samples taken from two different cohorts. The sample remains small compared with the population in each case which is over 4000, and is made up of applicants seeking to study management which this is likely to have affected their willingness to engage with the language of business and the market compared with applicants for other disciplines. The personal statement extracts were identified by the research and it could be argued that this is a somewhat subjective process despite attempts to focus only on statements that relate to the reasons for choice, the choice of university and school. The matching process with website information is also carried out with great care but there is still a possibility that the applicants themselves are using older material for example older brochures or other hard copy material or advertising from universities other than the case study institution, to write their statements. It is important to also note that the personal statements are not required for most applicants in the admissions process;
students are not required to write a statement, although they are required for MBA applications where work experience is an essential criterion for admission.

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